

The Book of Numbers, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: The Twelve Spies and Israel's Unbelief

Numbers 13:1–14:45

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is the heart of the book of Numbers, and the doctrinal stakes could not be higher. At Kadesh-barnea the issue is faith versus unbelief, and an entire generation's destiny turns on it. God had redeemed Israel out of Egypt, parted the sea before them, thundered from Sinai, and fed them daily with manna. Everything they needed to trust Him had already been given. Yet when faced with the giants and the walled cities, they let their fears grow larger than their God, and they refused to go in. The teacher must make plain that their failure was not a failure of intelligence or courage about the giants; it was a failure to believe God. That unbelief, and the disobedience it produced, kept a whole generation out of the rest God had promised them.

The New Testament seizes on this exact event and presses it on the church. Hebrews 3:7–4:11 and 1 Corinthians 10:1–12 hold up Israel's fall as a written warning to us, lest any of us fall after the same example of unbelief. This is where the lesson confronts the popular doctrine of once saved, always saved. These were redeemed people. They had passed through the sea (a figure of deliverance), they had eaten spiritual food, and yet their carcasses fell in the wilderness because of unbelief and rebellion. The plain teaching is that a person genuinely delivered by God can still fall away through unbelief and disobedience, and therefore Christians are warned, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall, and, let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example. Salvation calls for an ongoing, living, trusting, obedient faith, not a one-time security that exempts us from perseverance. The teacher should hold this together with God's mercy: He pardoned the people in 14:20, yet the consequence of exclusion still stood. God's justice and His mercy are both fully real.

For the formation of the student, the aim is to produce the faith of Caleb and Joshua, men who saw the same giants but wholly followed the Lord. The class should leave not merely informed about an old failure but examined by it: Where am I letting fear outgrow God's promise? Where am I longing for an old Egypt? Where am I following God partially rather than wholly? The goal is a heart that hears today and does not harden, that trusts the God who has already proved Himself, and that takes the obedient step forward into what He has called us to. Above all, point them to the rest that remains for the people of God in Christ, and to Christ Himself, the faithful one through whom we enter that rest by persevering faith.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Numbers 13:26–33 all twelve spies agree the land is good and flowing with milk and honey, yet ten conclude we are not able to go up. What was the real difference between the report of the ten and the report of Caleb and Joshua, and why does Scripture call the ten's report an evil report (13:32)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The mission and the report fill chapter 13. Twelve leaders, one from each tribe, go up to survey the land. They are gone forty days, and they return with overwhelming physical evidence that God told the truth: a single cluster of grapes so large it must be carried on a pole between two men, along with pomegranates and figs. The land surely flows with milk and honey, exactly as God had said.

All twelve agree on the facts. The land is good. The fruit is real. But then ten of them add a fatal word: Nevertheless the people be strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are walled, and very great. The same facts that should have stirred faith stir fear instead. The grapes prove God keeps His word, yet the giants make them forget it.

Scripture calls what the ten brought an evil report (13:32). It was not evil because it was false in its details; the giants and walls were real. It was evil because it interpreted the facts without God. They measured the obstacles against their own strength and left the Lord out of the equation entirely.

Caleb's voice cuts through in verse 30: he stills the people and says, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it. He sees the same giants. He simply factors in the God who had already split the sea. That is the whole difference, and it is the difference between faith and unbelief.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- All twelve spies saw the same facts; the difference was faith, not information.
- The evil report (13:32) was evil because it interpreted reality without reckoning on God.
- Faith does not deny the giants; it measures them against the God who keeps His promises.
- The same evidence (the cluster of grapes) confirmed God's word yet did not produce trust in the ten.
- Unbelief leaves God out of the equation and weighs obstacles only against human strength.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Scripture call the spies' report evil even though its details were accurate?
- What does Caleb's let us go up at once reveal about how he was weighing the situation?
- How can the same set of facts lead one person to fear and another to faith?

Question 2

Student Question:

The ten spies said, we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight (13:33). When have you let how you see yourself, rather than how God sees the situation, decide what you believed was possible?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The ten reach their conclusion with a telling phrase: We were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight (13:33). Notice the order. First they shrank themselves in their own eyes; then they assumed the giants saw them that way too. Their self-perception came first, and it shaped everything.

This is the inner mechanism of unbelief. They did not begin with God and measure the giants against Him. They began with themselves, felt small, and projected that smallness onto the whole situation. The grasshopper feeling became the grasshopper verdict.

The tragedy is that their estimate of themselves left God entirely out. As grasshoppers against giants, they were of course doomed. But they were never meant to face the giants alone. The God who had defeated Egypt was with them. Their math was not wrong; their equation was missing the most important factor.

For the believer, this exposes how often our sense of what is possible is set by how we feel about ourselves rather than by who God is. When we start with our own inadequacy and stop there, we will always come back with an evil report. Faith does not deny our smallness; it refuses to leave God out of the comparison.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Unbelief often begins with a distorted self-perception (as grasshoppers) that crowds out God.
- How we see ourselves can quietly decide what we think is possible.
- Leaving God out of the comparison guarantees defeat in our own eyes.
- Faith does not deny human weakness but refuses to reckon without God.
- Feelings of inadequacy must not be allowed to become verdicts about God's power.

Discussion Prompts

- How did the spies' view of themselves shape their conclusion about the giants?
- Where do you tend to start with your own inadequacy and stop there?
- What changes when God is added back into the way we measure an obstacle?

Question 3**Student Question:**

Caleb stilled the people and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it (13:30), and later he and Joshua insisted, if the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land (14:8). What is the nature of the faith Caleb and Joshua displayed, and how is it different from mere optimism or self-confidence?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Caleb and Joshua model what real faith looks like. In 13:30 Caleb says they are well able to overcome it, and in 14:7–9 the two of them together plead with the whole congregation: The land is an exceeding good land. If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land. Rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear ye the people, for they are bread for us, and the Lord is with us.

Their confidence is not optimism and it is not self-confidence. They do not say the giants are smaller than reported, or that Israel is stronger than it looks. Their hope rests entirely on a phrase: the Lord is with us. Their faith is confidence in God's character and proven faithfulness, not in their own resources.

This is the crucial distinction for the class. Optimism says things will probably work out. Self-confidence says I can handle this. Faith says God is with us and God keeps His word, therefore we can go. Caleb and Joshua had no illusions about the difficulty; they had convictions about the Lord.

Notice too the courage it took. They stood against ten respected leaders and a weeping, furious nation. Faith is not always comfortable or popular. It often means standing nearly alone, telling the truth about God when everyone else is telling the truth only about the giants.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True faith rests on God's character and proven faithfulness, not on optimism or self-confidence.
- Caleb and Joshua's hope was the Lord is with us, not a denial of the difficulty.
- Faith may require standing nearly alone against the majority.
- Faith is timeless trusting, obedient confidence in God, drawn here from Israel without anachronism.
- Courage flows from conviction about God, not from underestimating the obstacle.

Discussion Prompts

- How is the faith of Caleb and Joshua different from positive thinking or self-reliance?
- What did it cost them to give the minority report, and why did they do it anyway?
- What phrase anchored their confidence, and what anchors yours?

Question 4

Student Question:

Caleb and Joshua had seen the very same giants and walls the others saw. What would it look like for you to face the same hard facts others face, yet respond with faith instead of fear this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 14 opens with the people's collapse. All the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night (14:1). Then the weeping turns to murmuring against Moses and Aaron, and finally to open rebellion: Were it not better for us to return into Egypt? And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt (14:3-4).

Think about what they are proposing. They want to undo the exodus. They want to march back to the land of slavery, the land of the lash and the brick quotas, the land God had judged with ten plagues to set them free. Their fear has so distorted their memory that bondage looks better than the promise.

This is why the desire to return to Egypt is such a grave form of unbelief. It despises God's deliverance. It treats the salvation He worked at such cost as a mistake to be reversed. It says, in effect, we would rather be slaves under Pharaoh than pilgrims under God.

And it shows how quickly redeemed people can turn. Only a short time before, they had sung at the sea, The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation. Now they want a captain to take them back. Deliverance does not guarantee a faithful heart; the redeemed must keep choosing to trust their Redeemer.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Wanting to return to Egypt despises the deliverance God worked at great cost.
- Fear can so distort memory that former bondage looks better than God's promise.
- Redeemed people can turn against their Deliverer with alarming speed.
- Past deliverance does not guarantee present faithfulness; trust must be ongoing.
- Rebellion against God's appointed leaders here is rebellion against God Himself.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is longing to return to Egypt treated as so serious an offense against God?
- How does fear rewrite our memory of the past?
- What does the speed of Israel's turn warn us about our own hearts?

Question 5**Student Question:**

In Numbers 14:1–4 the people weep, murmur against Moses and Aaron, and propose choosing a captain to return to Egypt. Why is wanting to go back to Egypt such a serious form of unbelief, and what does it reveal about how quickly redeemed people can despise God's deliverance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The crisis reaches its peak when the congregation talks of stoning Caleb and Joshua (14:10). At that very moment the glory of the Lord appears in the tabernacle before all the people. God intervenes, and His words are piercing: How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them? (14:11).

Notice what God identifies as the root sin. Not their fear of giants as such, but their refusal to believe Him, despite all the signs He had shown. The plagues, the sea, the cloud, the manna, Sinai itself, none of it had produced trust. The problem was never a lack of evidence. The problem was a hardened, unbelieving heart.

God's question, how long, reveals His patience strained to its limit. He had borne with their murmuring again and again. But persistent, willful unbelief, in the face of overwhelming proof of His faithfulness, is a thing God will not indulge forever. There comes a point of accountability.

This is sobering for any people who have seen God's hand and still will not trust Him. Unbelief is not a small or excusable weakness; God calls it provocation. The same Lord who is gracious and long-suffering also says how long, and means it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God names unbelief, not merely fear, as the root sin at Kadesh.
- No amount of evidence produces faith in a heart determined not to believe.
- Persistent, willful unbelief provokes God even in a people He has richly blessed.
- God's patience is real but not without limit; there is a point of accountability.
- Unbelief is treated by God as a grave offense, not a minor weakness.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God point to their unbelief rather than their fear of the giants?
- What does it mean that all the signs still did not produce faith?
- How should God's how long question shape the way we treat our own doubts?

Question 6

Student Question:

Israel romanticized Egypt, the very place of their slavery, when the journey grew hard. What old bondage or former way of life do you find yourself looking back on with longing when following God becomes difficult?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Moses' intercession in 14:13–19 is one of the great prayers of Scripture. When God speaks of disinheriting the nation and making of Moses a greater one, Moses does not seize the offer. Instead he pleads for the people, and his argument is striking: he appeals not to Israel's worthiness (they have none) but to God's own name and character.

He reasons that the Egyptians and the nations will hear, and will say the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land, so He killed them in the wilderness. Moses is jealous for God's reputation among the nations. Then he quotes God's own self-revelation: The Lord is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression (14:18).

And he asks for pardon on that basis: Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of thy mercy. This is intercession at its finest. Moses stands in the gap for people who, only moments before, had wanted to replace him and return to Egypt. He prays for those who had failed him and failed God.

For the believer, Moses models a kind of prayer that does not give up on failing people. When we are tempted to write others off, or to write ourselves off, Moses shows us how to appeal to the mercy and character of God rather than to anyone's deserving. He also foreshadows the greater Intercessor who ever lives to make intercession for us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moses interceded on the basis of God's name and character, not Israel's worthiness.
- He refused to be exalted at the expense of the people God had called him to lead.
- Effective prayer appeals to God's mercy and revealed nature (14:18).
- Intercession does not give up on failing people or on oneself.
- Moses' standing in the gap foreshadows Christ, our great Intercessor (Hebrews 7:25).

Discussion Prompts

- On what basis did Moses ask God to pardon, and why does that matter for our prayers?
- What does it say about Moses that he prayed for people who had just turned on him?
- How might Moses' example reshape the way you pray for people who keep failing?

Question 7

Student Question:

When the people threaten to stone Caleb and Joshua, the glory of the Lord appears, and God says, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me? (14:11). What does this reveal about how God regards persistent unbelief, even from a people He has so visibly blessed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here we arrive at the moment that holds God's mercy and justice together. God answers Moses: I have pardoned according to thy word (14:20). The pardon is real. God does not destroy the nation in a moment as He had threatened. Mercy genuinely prevails over immediate destruction.

And yet the same God who pardons then declares the consequence: all those men who had seen His glory and His miracles, and had tempted Him these ten times, and had not hearkened to His voice, surely they shall not see the land. Their carcasses would fall in the wilderness, and their children would wander forty years bearing the consequence of their fathers' unbelief, until that generation was gone (14:22–35).

This is one of the most important truths in the chapter, and it must not be softened. Pardon and consequence are not contradictory. God forgave the sin in the sense that He spared the nation and continued His covenant purposes, yet the rebels still forfeited the land. Forgiveness does not always erase every earthly result of sin.

We must hold both truths with equal seriousness. A God who only judged would be terrifying; a God who only pardoned, with no consequences ever, would not be just or holy. The God of Numbers 14 is both merciful and just, and He calls His people to take both realities to heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's pardon (14:20) is real; mercy genuinely spares the nation from immediate destruction.
- Pardon and consequence coexist; the rebels still forfeited the land.
- Forgiveness does not always remove every earthly consequence of sin.
- God is both merciful and just, and neither attribute cancels the other.
- We must not soften the seriousness of the consequence or doubt the reality of the mercy.

Discussion Prompts

- How can God truly pardon and yet still impose the consequence of exclusion from the land?
- Why is it important to hold God's mercy and His justice together?
- Where in your own life have you seen sin forgiven and yet consequences remain?

Question 8

Student Question:

Moses interceded for the people, appealing to God's own character and reputation (14:13–19). When you are tempted to give up on people who keep failing, or on yourself, how might Moses' example of intercession reshape the way you pray?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let us trace the dreadful logic of the sentence. The spies searched the land forty days. So the people will wander forty years, a year for each day, until all that generation of fighting men, everyone twenty and upward who murmured, has died in the wilderness (14:33–34). The punishment fits the crime with terrible precision.

Two men are exempted, and the reason is stated plainly. Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully, him will I bring into the land (14:24). Joshua likewise is spared. The phrase wholly followed the Lord becomes Caleb's epitaph and his crown, repeated again in Joshua 14 when at eighty-five he claims his mountain.

There is a bitter irony in 14:39–45. After hearing the sentence, the people mourn, and then they presume to go up and fight after all, even though Moses warns them the Lord is not among them. This is not faith; it is presumption, obedience offered a day too late and on their own terms. The Amalekites and Canaanites come down and beat them back as far as Hormah.

The lesson is severe. Faith refused on the day God commanded cannot be manufactured the next day by mere willpower. Their late charge up the hill was as faithless, in its way, as their earlier refusal, because both ignored what God had actually said. Obedience must be on God's terms and in God's time, flowing from trust, not from regret.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The forty years of wandering precisely matched the forty days of spying (14:34).
- Caleb and Joshua were spared because they wholly followed the Lord (14:24).
- The defeat at Hormah (14:39–45) was presumption, not faith, obedience offered too late and on Israel's own terms.
- Faith refused at God's appointed time cannot be replaced by self-willed effort.
- Obedience must flow from trust and be on God's terms, not driven by mere regret.

Discussion Prompts

- Why was the people's later attempt to go up and fight an act of presumption rather than faith?
- What does the phrase wholly followed the Lord say about Caleb and Joshua?
- What is the difference between true repentance and trying to undo consequences by willpower?

Question 9

Student Question:

In Numbers 14:20–35 God pardons the people in response to Moses' prayer (I have pardoned according to thy word, 14:20), yet still declares that none of that generation, except Caleb and Joshua, will enter the land; their carcasses will fall in the wilderness over forty years. The New Testament uses this very event to warn Christians: these people were redeemed out of Egypt,

passed through the sea, ate spiritual food, and still fell through unbelief and disobedience (1 Corinthians 10:1–12; Hebrews 3:7–4:11). In light of this, how should we understand the claim once saved, always saved, and what does it mean that Christians must take heed lest they fall (1 Corinthians 10:12; Hebrews 4:1, 11)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now we reach the heaviest matter in the whole study, and we must let the New Testament speak. The Holy Spirit takes this very night at Kadesh and presses it on the church as a warning. In 1 Corinthians 10:1–12 Paul says all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and were all baptized unto Moses, and did all eat the same spiritual meat. They were redeemed, delivered, and sustained by God. And yet, he says, with many of them God was not well pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now all these things happened unto them for examples, and they are written for our admonition. Then comes the hammer: Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall (10:12).

Hebrews 3:7–4:11 does the same. It quotes Psalm 95, Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, and says of that generation, So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief. Then it turns to us: Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. And, Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief (4:1, 11).

This is the decisive answer to the popular claim once saved, always saved. These were not outsiders. They were God's redeemed people, brought out of Egypt by His mighty hand, baptized in the cloud and the sea, fed with His provision. And they fell, finally and fatally, through unbelief and disobedience, and were shut out of the rest He had promised. If a people so delivered could fall, then the security that exempts a Christian from any possibility of falling away simply is not what Scripture teaches.

The plain conclusion is the one the Spirit Himself draws. Christians must take heed lest they fall. Salvation is received and kept by a living, trusting, obedient faith that perseveres, not by a one-time transaction that makes vigilance unnecessary. The same grace that saves also warns, and the warning is part of the grace. God holds out His rest to us, and bids us labour to enter it, lest we fall after the same example of unbelief. We must hold this together with His mercy, as in 14:20: God truly pardons the penitent, yet He calls His people to endure to the end.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Redeemed Israel (under the cloud, through the sea, fed by God) still fell in the wilderness through unbelief (1 Corinthians 10:1–5).
- The New Testament applies Kadesh directly to Christians as a written warning (1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 3:7–4:11).
- The claim once saved, always saved is refuted: a delivered people fell away and were excluded from God's rest.

- Christians are commanded to take heed lest they fall (1 Corinthians 10:12) and to labour to enter that rest (Hebrews 4:11).
- Salvation is kept by a living, persevering, trusting, obedient faith, not by a security that makes vigilance needless.
- God's mercy (14:20) and His call to perseverance stand together; pardon for the penitent, yet endurance required to the end.
- Unbelief and a hardened heart, not weakness of strength, are what shut people out of God's rest (Hebrews 3:19).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter so much that the Israelites who fell were genuinely redeemed people?
- How do 1 Corinthians 10:12 and Hebrews 4:1, 11 answer the claim once saved, always saved?
- If God truly pardoned in 14:20 yet the consequence stood, what does that teach us about mercy and perseverance together?

Question 10

Student Question:

Caleb is commended because he wholly followed the Lord (14:24). Name one specific area where Jesus is calling you, right now, to follow Him fully and not partially, and what trusting, obedient step that would require of you this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends, but the question it raises lands squarely on us. Caleb is held up as the pattern: he wholly followed the Lord, with no reservation, no partial obedience, no Egypt held back in his heart. Years later, an old man of eighty-five, he is still claiming his inheritance with the same wholehearted faith (Joshua 14). His was a life given fully to God.

That is the formation this lesson aims at. Most of us do not refuse God outright, as Israel did. We follow Him partially. We trust Him in the areas that are comfortable and hold back in the areas where the giants look too big. We keep one eye on Egypt. Caleb's example exposes the gap between partial and whole following.

Hebrews turns the whole episode into an invitation as well as a warning: There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. The rest Israel forfeited is still held out to us in Christ, and we enter it by the persevering faith they lacked. Today, if we will hear His voice, we are not to harden our hearts.

So the closing call is personal and immediate. Where is the Lord asking you to follow Him fully rather than partially? What is the one area where your faith has stalled at the border, where the obstacle looks bigger than the promise? The faithful response is not a heroic charge up the hill in

our own strength, like the men at Hormah, but a humble, trusting, obedient step taken at God's word and in God's time, today, while it is still called today.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Caleb wholly followed the Lord, a life of wholehearted, persevering faith (14:24; Joshua 14).
- The common danger is not outright refusal but partial following, with one eye still on Egypt.
- A rest still remains for the people of God in Christ, entered by persevering faith (Hebrews 4:9).
- Today, if we hear His voice, we must not harden our hearts (Hebrews 3:7-8).
- Faithful obedience is a trusting step at God's word and in God's time, not self-willed effort like Hormah.

Discussion Prompts

- Where in your life is the gap between following God partially and following Him wholly?
- What border are you stalled at, where the obstacle looks bigger than God's promise?
- What would one trusting, obedient step toward Caleb's wholehearted faith look like for you this week?